

Old San Jaun - A Walking Tour...

Continued from page 1

Along these streets paved in history, there's plenty to see and plenty to buy including hammocks brought to the island by the indigenous Taino Indians... cigars, still hand-rolled using locally grown Puerto

Rican tobacco... Santos, lovely detailed wood-carved figurines of the patron saints, handmade by local Santeros... mundillo, intricately woven bobbin lace... and musical instruments, hewn from native trees, such as the cuatro (a five-string

guitar) and simple gourd guiros (dating back to Indian times)... and of course, rum, the island's major export.

Besides local crafts, there are great buys to be found on imports from around the globe, including silk from Thailand... linen

and cotton dresses and suits... Spanish antique furniture and reproductions... antique kettles, ladles and candlesticks... native art paintings and sculpture from Haiti... handmade wall coverings from Colombia... kapok tree mats from the Philippines... pure silk saries and handwoven cotton bedspreads from India... and precious jewels, gold and silver at prices you never imagined.

There are several excellent guidebooks to help you along the way. Que Pasa, written and distributed free (courtesy of the Government of Puerto Rico Tourism Company) is an excellent guide providing useful information on events in San Juan and out on the island; hotel accommodation; restaurant listings; rent-a-car agencies; important telephone numbers; maps; and more.

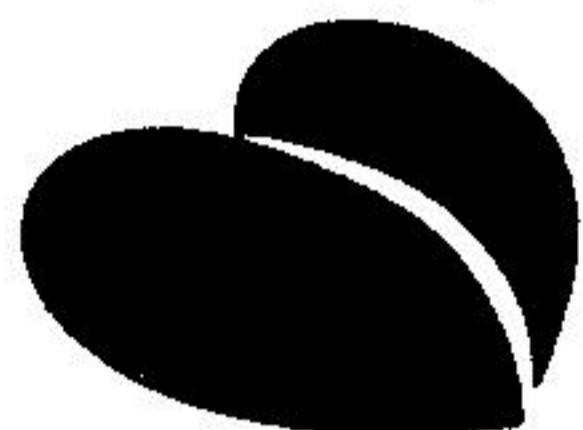
Centuries-old buildings crowd a tiny island, caressed by breezes and surrounded by deep blue water, which juts into a narrow harbour. Its almost half a millenium of history makes Old San Juan the second oldest European-built city in the New World and a virtual treasure-trove of legends and tales. Curious folklore, colorful customs and supernatural phenomena mingle with historical facts in innumerable local stories handed down from one generation to the next. These tales, of guards abducted by the Devil, of torch-lit processions praying for an invader's defeat, of dogs petrified for their patience, evoke San Juan's past as vividly as do its churches, forts and the amber glow of its street-lamps.

A shout was heard in the night. Each hour the sound, long and at times mournful, resonated along the length of the city walls. Encircling San Juan for some 3,900 yards, these walls were crowned in places by sentry boxes and bastions, and pierced by tunnels that were communications routes connecting the outskirts of the city. Heavy doors that shut at night protected the tunnels and left San Juan isolated from the rest of the island by land and from the rest of the world by sea. Of the original four doors, only the San Juan Gate, next to La Fortaleza on the western shore, remains standing today. In the sentry boxes rising from this long span of walls, guards on duty shouted all-clear calls that linked one box to the next and kept the guards awake during starry, and stormy, nights. Of all the sentry boxes, the lower one on the north wall of San Cristobal Fort reaches closest to the sea.

One night a guard disappeared from the sea-hugging box. At around midnight, he did not repeat the all-clear call shouted by his companion in the box to the east. The guard in the box to the west mistook the voice of the first guard for that of the second, and it was not until the next day that the guard's absence was reported. He never reappeared. Officials made an inconclusive investigation of the incident. When nothing was found, the populace came to the conclusion that the Devil had carried the guard away.

Some time later the even stranger disappearance of another guard from the same sentry box caused great concern. When the same thing happened yet a third time, a more complete investigation finally got to the truth of the disappearances. Those three guards, dissatisfied with the treatment they were receiving in the military, had deserted. After following a treacherous route along the north coast toward the east, each hid in a remote shelter, changed his identity and lived a rural life of unwedded bliss with a local peasant girl. Since the results of the final investigation were never made public, residents of San Juan remained convinced that the Devil had spirited away the deserters. Even today that guard post is known as the "Devil's sentry box."

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